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Slip, slop, slap: rethinking, re-writing and re-viewing Australia

Abstract:

The well-known mantra 'slip on a T-shirt, slop on some sunscreen and slap on a hat' articulates the Australian Cancer Council's mission to promote an awareness of the need to ensure protection against the harmful effects of the Australian sun. Of the three actions evoked in the above slogan, the one on which we will focus in this paper is 'the slap'. Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The slap* (2008) builds on and breaks from a wide range of narratives about Australia, its people and preoccupations. These same elements of Australian culture are currently being explored in the adaptation of that novel – an eight-part drama series screened on ABC television which, like the novel before it, has elicited a variety of audience responses, expressed in a range of cultural forms and forums. In this paper, which constitutes a preliminary discussion of what is envisaged as a more extensive research project and research-informed teaching exercise, we focus on a short segment from the novel and a sequence from the television series to illustrate what rethinking, re-writing and re-viewing of Australia they provoke. In addition, we outline our notion of designing a new (replacement) English, Communication and Media (ECM) unit of study based entirely on and around *The slap* – as prose and film narratives – and their cultural precursors and repercussions.

Biographical note:

Dr Jeremy Fisher is Senior Lecturer in Writing and researches publishing and writing practice. Before taking up his academic appointment, Dr Fisher worked in the Australian publishing industry for many years as an editor, indexer, publisher and author. He was also Executive Director of the Australian Society of Authors from 2004 to 2009. Dr Jane O'Sullivan is Senior Lecturer in Communications and Media. Her research interests include the nature of gendered power relations in film, theatre and prose, and, most recently, the representation of animals in popular culture. She is interested in problem-based approaches to teaching and learning.

Keywords:

The slap – Tsiolkas, Christos – scenario-based learning – Australian literature – Pedagogy of writing

In the pedagogy of writing, the study of written texts looms large. If this is not incorporated into the traditional workshop model of teaching writing, it may appear in the form of reading units that may come from literary studies, cultural studies or writing disciplines. As we teach in a School where Writing is a subject within the English, Communications and Media discipline, we sought ways in which the various aspects of this discipline could be usefully combined in a unit of study. To this end, we chose to investigate, by developing, teaching and assessing a three-week trial 'topic' within an existing unit on popular and creative culture, what the novel *The slap* (2008) and its adaptation as TV drama series (2011) would have to offer as the entire focus of a future one-semester unit. We chose the book because of its topical content and also because its author represented a new generation of Australian writers. As well, the television series had generated a significant amount of critical attention and featured characters and a storyline with whom our students could engage. Also, the book and series were accessible to our students, 80% of whom study off campus and online.

We decided that *The slap* had much to offer – sufficient to sustain a full semester of exploration and analysis because, as novel and TV drama, it offers insights into and provokes discussions around narratives of Australian identity and Australian creative industries represented in their production, distribution and reception.

These two 'slaps' build on and break from a wide range of narratives about Australia, its people and preoccupations. In so doing, they allow for a discussion of Australian narrative representations of identity that include the perspectives of a range of subjectivities brought into conflict in the otherwise banal context of the backyard barbeque. *The slap*, in both its representational forms, has elicited a variety of audience responses, expressed in a range of cultural forms and forums including television and radio book shows and interviews, newspaper reviews, conference papers, blogs, Twitter etc. In more traditionally academic terms, Sachdev (2010) points out how Richie, as a boy himself, links both the child Hugo and the man Hector as different representations of masculinity in transition. Bonnici (2012) declares that the book is 'one that shows future trends for multicultural literature and independent postcolonial writing'.

At our institution, resource restrictions (i.e. staffing) over a number of years have required that disciplines rationalise (i.e. reduce) the number of units on offer to students. This has had an effect of limiting the range or breadth of texts and contexts that can be explored in the undergraduate programs. Our devising of a unit focused on *The slap* was in response to this process and to the resulting need to ensure undergraduate units in the broad disciplinary areas of English, Media and Communication (EMC) do as much 'work' as possible in providing an academic context that facilitates in-depth and ultimately transferable skills and knowledge. In this case, an attempt has been made to devise a unit that can contribute to the learning outcomes of studies in literature, media and writing.

We show a diagram/flow chart of the content of a one semester-length unit in Figure 1.

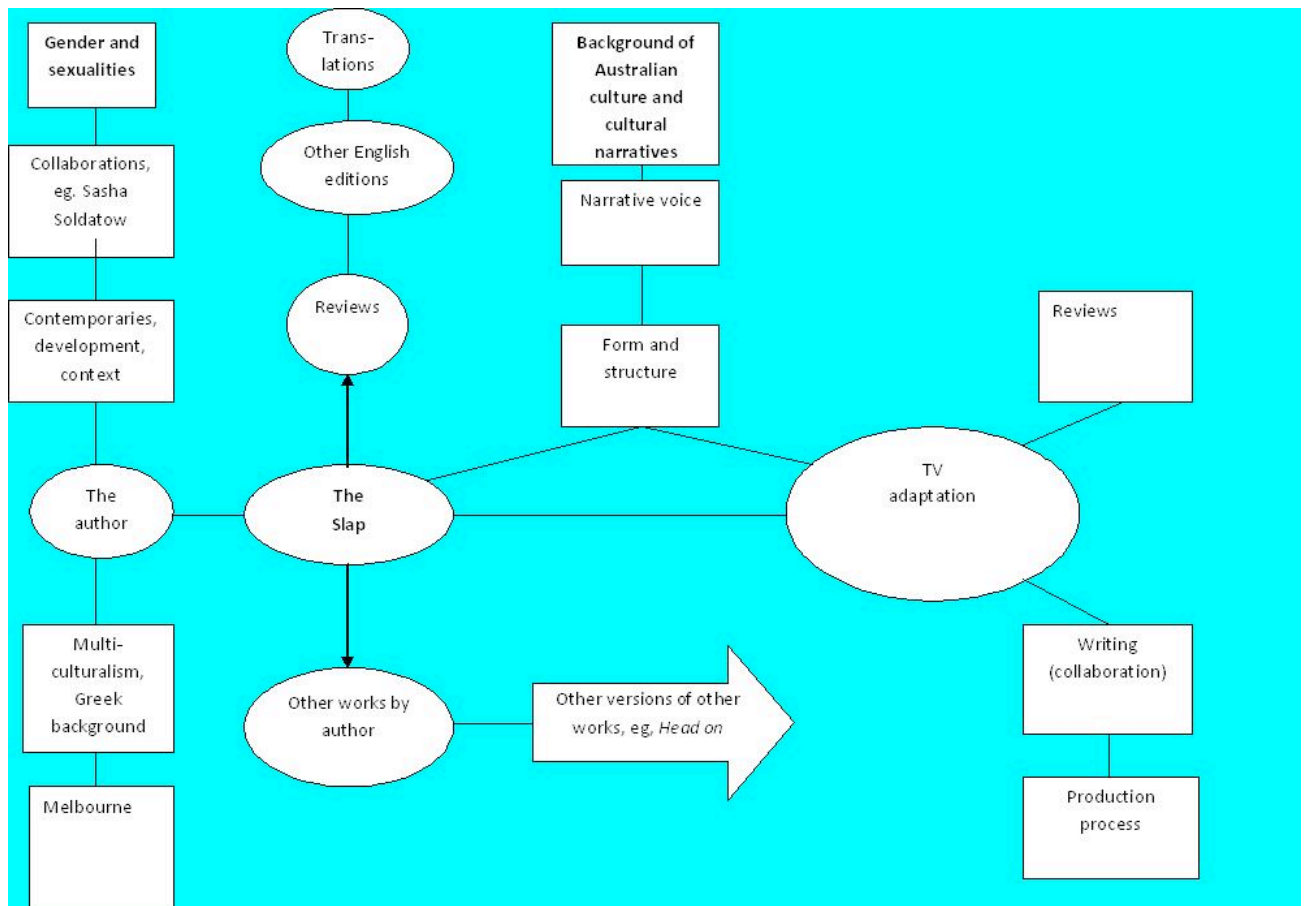


Figure 1: Unit content diagram/flow chart

'Slip, slop, slap' is a mantra evocative of narrative constructions of iconic Australian lifestyles stereotypically characterised as outdoors, sun-worshipping activities involving bronzed surfers and bikini-clad sheilas or cattle-droving, shearing, roo-shooting (oh – and fighting at Gallipoli) mates. There are many examples of narratives that present mainstream Australia with such flattering images of itself including: in films, the 'loveable larrikinism' of stockmen and bushrangers and 'all-round good blokes' (*The man from Snowy River*; *Ned Kelly*; *The castle*) and the courageous or hopelessly lost antics of frontier women (*My brilliant career*; *Picnic at hanging rock*); in plays, the alcohol-fuelled responses to a dramatic moment of conflict (*Don's party*; *The removalists*; *Blackrock*); in novels, outback endurance as in *The Tree of Man* and *Tourmaline*, and urban life as in *The man who loved children*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, *My place* and *Cloudstreet*.

Often these stories are played out by antithetically laid-back, no-frills people whose linguistically challenged (or at least, minimalist) utterances resonate in the simple alliterative and onomatopoeic shorthand of 'slip, slop, slap'. And, of course, all these 'typical' Australians were portrayed as from an Anglo-Celtic stock much in need of such sun protection. Fortunately, in more recent years Australian creative industries have broadened the scope of their subject matter and (perhaps) funding practices, to encapsulate the lives and some of the concerns of previous subjectivities, including Indigenous Australians and those 'othered' on the basis of ethnicity or sexuality, as exemplified in such narratives as *Rabbit proof fence*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Box the*

pony, For the patriarch, Tsiolkas' own Loaded (and its film version, Head on), Monkey's mask, Walking on water and East-west 101.

Christos Tsiolkas, and many of the characters in *The slap*, identify or have been identified as belonging to groups largely left out of earlier images Australians presented of and to themselves. Tsiolkas and those he draws upon in *The slap* for his narratives are neither beach nor bush, but somewhere in-between, situated in and around an arguably liminal suburban clutter of old weatherboard workers' cottages, flashy second-hand cars, McMansions and gleaming black marble benchtops. The complement of characters introduced in the first few pages of *The slap* reflects an almost unbelievable mix of gender, class and ethnicity, yet there is something they have in common: they live in Australia in the twenty-first century – and they are brought together in the context of the backyard, complete with barbecue and cricket.

Our three-week trial topic of *The slap* began with a short scenario (Figure 2) or lifelike fictional exchange designed to elicit students' engagement by requiring that they express an initial reaction and then move to the process of identifying and discussing issues raised by the scenario that are deserving of further exploration. This forms the impetus for their seeking additional knowledge of texts and contexts, in order to be able to formulate a considered response.

Scenario

Two of your friends are discussing a section from the novel *The slap* and the same section as presented in the TV series. One friend is most disturbed by the depiction of the slapping of the child, and by the behaviour of the adults that afternoon. The other friend, who has read more of the novel and viewed the whole TV series, declares that the incident is far less disturbing than the larger representation of contemporary Australian life that emerges that afternoon, and in subsequent events in the narrative. Your friends turn to you for your opinion. Unsure of where you stand in relation to the novel and the series, you decide to revisit the texts before expressing your view.

Figure 2: Fictional scenario

Students were asked to re-read the depiction of this 'slapping of the child' (Figure 3) and advised that they would also be revisiting the scenario in light of the audiovisual depiction of the 'slapping' incident in the television series.

After students were given time to note down their individual reactions, they formed small groups for discussion and then presented ideas to the class as a whole. Numerous issues were identified including those pertaining to family life, notions of idealised femininity, hegemonic masculinity, constructions of 'mainstream' and 'othered' identities (including those of ethnicity, class and sexuality), and ideals about what constitutes twenty-first century Australian culture. The next step involved the identifying of associated research needs, and these included close analysis of the primary text/s, and the various secondary resources provided, including print, online, and audio reviews of the novel and series (Allsop, 2012; MacFarlane, 2012; Maunder, 2008) and television discussions including on ABC TV's *The first tuesday book club* (2009) and ABC Radio National's *The book show* (2011a).

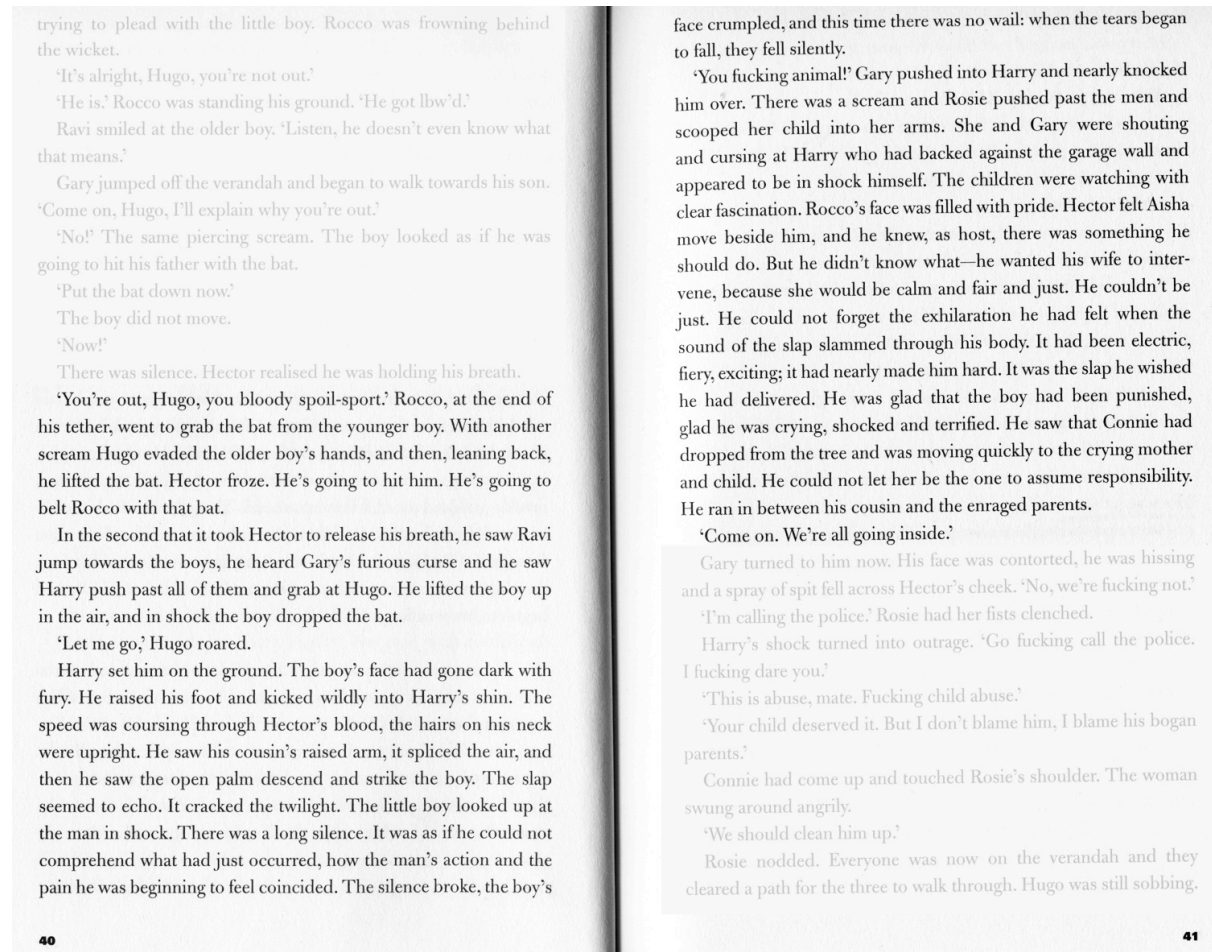


Figure 3: Extract from *The Slap*

Close analysis of 'Hector', the opening section of the novel, allowed for discussion of the work done at the beginning of a narrative, that of establishing the context, introducing the major characters, and providing an incident that requires a response from each character, and instigates the formation of alliances, conflicting views and the testing of relationships. In addition, such close analysis of the first section, in its tight focus on the 'title' character, Hector, demonstrated the manner in which the whole narrative was to be structured in sections which closely focus on the internal and external world of each major character, and the extent to which these worlds could be conveyed through dialogue, internal monologue and detailing of the characters' physical embodiment and enactment of their fears and desires. These prose elements, along with discussions of narrative voice and point of view, led into the discussion of the television series, and the quite different technologies of audiovisual representation. This required close viewing and identification of the use and effects of camera angle and shot selection to convey point of view, shot/reverse shot editing to establish physical and emotional connections, and all the elements of characterisation and mise en scène that establish the overall cultural context. Comparison of the two texts, novel and film, allowed for consideration of the distinctions made between omniscient narrator and internal monologue in the novel, and the interaction of camera and actor, as opposed to the arguably unnecessary and intrusive employment of the voice-over, in the television series.

Students' appreciation of textual adaptation and the technical and stylistic features of these distinct narrative forms was further enhanced by the observations of industry professionals (ABC Radio National, 2011b). Subsequent discussion of the ideologically informed hierarchies of literature and commercial fiction, readers and viewers, added to students' understandings of the construction of high and low culture, and these are, of course, key concepts in the wider subject matter of this trimester-length unit, *Popular and creative culture*.

In considering the creative context for *The slap*, we are lucky that a number of resources have been made publicly available. Tsiolkas has given many interviews about the book (ABC Radio National, 2011a; ABC TV, 2011; BBC *HARDtalk*, 2011) and his politics, philosophy, life history, and writing methodology have been documented by Somerville (2002). These resources then provided a platform for Christos Tsiolkas to become a major focus of study in his own right.

While we did not do so in our trial due to time limits, in a full-semester unit the study of Tsiolkas could be approached from a number of creative and cultural viewpoints. First, his Greek heritage opens up study of multicultural strands in Australian literature. He speaks about this heritage in the many interviews he has given and it is a significant influence in all his narratives, not only *The slap*.

Second, collaborative practice is another aspect of his work that can be teased out. Tsiolkas discusses his collaboration with Sasha Soldatow in Somerville (2002). Tsiolkas worked with Sasha Soldatow on their joint autobiography *Jump cuts* (1996) and was also involved in the scriptwriting of the television series of *The slap*. He has also written a play script in collaboration with other writers (Bovell et al., 1998), and that has been adapted into a movie as well (Kokkinos, 2009). It is possible to make these processes of collaborative writing part of the study of writing and the production of texts. This area could also be directed at publishing processes. For instance, Tsiolkas has worked with his publisher, Jane Palfreyman, at both Random House, his previous publisher, and at Allen & Unwin, his current publisher, and discussion of this relationship permits consideration of the current dynamics of book publishing.

Third, Tsiolkas has been open and frank about his political views, so this opens up a discussion of politics within *The slap*, and also the matter of how a politically conscious writer shapes a narrative. In any of these areas, other of Tsiolkas' works can be introduced for further study. For instance, Tsiolkas identified himself as an anarchist in the biographical note to his first novel *Loaded*, while *Dead Europe* (2005) provides a range of political dimensions, as well as a study of anti-Semitism. (There is also a scene of a slap of a child in *Dead Europe* that is almost the antithesis of Harry's admonition of Hugo.)

Dead Europe leads to a possible fourth area of the creative and cultural study of Tsiolkas. He is an openly gay writer. His first works were published by small gay presses and he has interacted with a number of significant gay writers. His work permits study of the reception and evolution of gay-themed literature in Australia. Here, there may be room to expand into literary studies. The contributions of Barlow and Dale (2007) and Hurley (2010) would be useful starting points for development of this element. Tsiolkas continues to be involved in writing and creative projects

emanating from the gay community, even though (like his former collaborator the late Sasha Soldatow) he maintains a critical perspective of that community, as revealed in Somerville (2002).

A fifth element of study, adaptation, arises from the fact that so many of Tsiolkas' works have been adapted from print into filmed form (besides *The slap*, *Loaded* has been filmed as *Head on*, a filmed version of *Dead Europe* was released in late 2012, and the play *Who's afraid of the working class?* was filmed as *Blessed*). In studying this aspect, there are a number of resources available in addition to comparison of the different forms of the work. One of these is the ABC Radio National interview with Tony Ayres and Kris Mrksa (ABC Radio National, 2011b).

A sixth cultural element could arise from study of the impact of publication and reception of *The slap* in countries outside Australia. The book has had both British and American editions, and also been translated into Italian, Greek, Slovenian, Dutch, Russian and French.

One aspect we did pursue in our trial was the manner of Tsiolkas' writing process. After the publication of the book and its favourable reception, Christos Tsiolkas allowed the journal *Overland* to publish part of an early draft (Sparrow and Tsiolkas, 2009). This draft differs significantly from the book. For instance, Hector, whose voice is first person, does not see the actual incident of the slap, but is told about it by Richie. By having this resource available, along with a brief commentary by the author, it is possible to study some aspects of Tsiolkas' process of writing. This could take shape in the form of comparison of the finished novel with the draft, and observing how the author changes certain aspects, as well as noting Tsiolkas' reaction to a re-reading of the early draft. One of the things he says is: 'What strikes me, re-reading it, is that in later versions the character of Hector would splinter off and part of him would become Harry and part of him would become Hector's father, Manolis' (Sparrow and Tsiolkas, 2009, 6). These comments formed the basis for discussion of how the final manuscript was shaped and the characters evolved.

Assessment

Consistent with these potential learning outcomes, a unit on *The slap* offers various types of assessment tasks – e.g. 'creative' responses (in written or visual forms) as well as more traditional exercises in textual and cultural analysis, possibly presented in the form of a journalistic piece or academic essay. Each, of course, requires preparatory close analysis and interpretation of the primary text/s, and awareness of factors influencing the production and reception of cultural narratives.

In teaching our trial unit on *The slap* we used two assessment tasks that called on students to consider characterisation within *The slap*. These were as follows:

1. *The slap* (novel and television series) is divided into sections, each bearing the name of one of the major characters, and with that character's actions and interior life as the focus. Your task is comprised of two parts. **Part one** requires that you write a shorter prose version (1250 words) of the first section (Hector) set at the party at the home of Hector and Aisha. This will include the

actions leading up to 'the slap', the slap itself, and the reactions registered by the various characters at the time. Your version is to be written from the point of view of either Sandi (Harry's wife) OR Garry (Rosie's husband). Your chosen character's thoughts and actions should be consistent with his or her character as it is presented in the novel and/or television series. **Part two** requires that you write an exegesis (750 words) in which you comment on your process of selecting your character (Sandy or Garry), and the various decisions and revisions you made in order to produce your final draft for submission. You may wish to include comments on the research that informed your decisions.

2. *The slap* (novel and television series) is divided into sections, each bearing the name of one of the major characters, and with that character's actions and interior life as the focus. Your task is to analyse the character and motivation of two of these major characters, and how they are represented in the novel or television series. Select for close analysis any two sections of the novel or television series (other than 'Hector'). Discuss how the 'focus' character of each of these two sections reacts to 'the slap' and account for each one's reaction, based on information provided in the novel or television series.

In addition, to allow for a later assessment of students' wider understanding of texts in terms of cultural contexts of production and consumption, they had the opportunity to write on this in the final examination.

Conclusion

In our three-week teaching model focused on *The slap* students were able to see that, rather than simply presenting a 'disturbing' examination of the slapping of a child, or of 'contemporary Australian life', the novel and TV series offer a rich representation of (possibly altered or previously overlooked) aspects and/or sections of contemporary Australian culture and that these narratives have emerged through the operations of a range of Australian creative industries. In a full unit we would expand this further, as we have outlined above.

Clearly, an exploration of these two texts invited a combined methodology of close textual analysis and wider cultural analysis and allowed for learning about literary fiction, the Australian publishing industry, visual narrative techniques and television broadcasting industries and audience modes of consumption. Furthermore, a third 'text' emerged in the form of television and radio book shows and interviews, newspaper reviews, conference papers, blogs, Twitter etc., all narrative forms deserving of scholarly analysis for the purposes of emulation and/or critique.

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